Religion

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Statement of The Rev. James L. Vizzard, S.J. representing the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, before the Subcommittee on Equipment, Supplies and Manpower concerning proposed extension of the U.S. Mexican Farm Labor Program.

My name is Father James L. Vizzard, S.J. I am Vice President of the Conference's Washington office at 1719 Rhode Island Avenue, Northwest, Washington, D.C. I appreciate the opportunity this subcommittee has given us to present our viewpoints on the identical bills now before you. We stand in opposition to these bills which propose to strike out the termination date contained in Section 509 of Title V of the Agriculture Act of 1949 as amended. We urge the elimination not of the termination date, but at the earliest possible moment, the termination of the Mexican Farm Labor Program itself. At the same time we wish to express our unalterable opposition to any substitute program or process or subterfuge which might make possible the continued importation of large masses of Mexican farm labor to work in our fields. Our opposition is expressly directed towards an alternative which we understand is now being explored by employers and user associations to make possible the wholesale granting of temporary permits by the Immigration Service such as the Service is now doing in the new Japanese labor program.

Our opposition both to the continuation of Public Law 78 and to the substitution of any alternate program has two general bases:

1. The program in itself has been accompanied by many evils which, even if not an essentail part of the program, nonetheless have in one degree or another invariably accompanied it.

2. The very existence of the program makes practically impossible the solution of the many serious problems of the U.S. citizens who are in the migratory labor group. In this statement each of these major sources of objection will be dealt with in turn.

PART I

First then, the evils which have accompanied and apparently have become an unshakable part of the Mexican Farm Labor Program itself:

1. The Certification Process.

The program often and perhaps even generally has been characterized by feeble and ineffective efforts or no efforts at all to secure U.S. citizens for the jobs. This, I suppose, should cause no surprise. Employment offices are experienced and realistic. They know that for the most part it would be a waste of time to attempt to find American citizens who will, except in the case of dire extremity, accept the miserable income possibilities and conditions of life and labor which employers have been offering. I suppose it is equally understandable why growers generally prefer Mexican labor and why, therefore, employment officers are often under severe pressure to certify a shortage of local labor even when our own citizens might be available. The braceros are in a situation where docility is enforcable. Moreover they can be had generally on schedule when needed and can easily be got rid of when the job is done. Because of severe poverty and lack of opportunity at home they are willing to accept wages, living and working conditions that are intolerable to U.S. citizens.

At any rate few who are interested in this issue are unaware of or unable to cite specific instances of gross negligence and even of venal collusion in applying the certification requirements of Public Law 78.

2. The Contracting Process on the Mexican Side of the Border.

The intolerable and inhuman conditions which often prevail in the contracting centers in Mexico have been so outrageous that, without irreverence, they have been characterized as "the bracero's way of the cross." Inadequate

provisions for housing, feeding and other facilities have been chronic and unsolved. Bribery, the mordida which seems to be expected, generally must be paid. Most braceros must borrow at very high rates of interest what is for them a very large sum in order to make their way to the contracting center and bribe their way into a job.

3. Wages - Income.

The work contract requires that the bracero be paid not less than the "prevailing wage". The determination of the "prevailing wage" is a very interesting process. The employers as I understand it simply decide unilaterally what might be the absolute minimum they can get away with. That minimum then becomes the prevailing wage.

Considerable attention was given recently in the press of certain parts of the country to the laudable effort by the U. S. Department of Labor to require a minimum of fifty cents an hour even for work done under piece rates. I understand that the employers vigorously protested and proposed that twenty-five cents an hour was preferable since then the workers would stay on the job all day. "Incentive pay" they call it.

Of course in other parts of the country the hourly or piece rate pay is considerably higher - perhaps up one hundred percent higher, making it possible, theoretically at least, for the bracero to make the princely sum of seventy cents all the way up to one dollar per hour when he works.

Out of this wage, however, must be taken certain deductions such as, e.g., a dollar, seventy-five cents per day for food, and certain charges for insurance. In both these cases I have the feeling that an honest and objective investigation would uncover some of the most sordid and illegal bribery and profit-making to be found anywhere in America. I understand

much evidence is available of the most unconscionable and unforgivable exploitation of the already pitifully low wages of the braceros which would make the corruption found in the Teamsters Union seem only like petty larceny.

4. Transportation and Housing.

Although considerable and to some small degree effective efforts have been made to improve safety, health and comfort in the transportation of braceros and in their housing, no one, I believe, would dare to claim that the problems have come even close to being solved. I have with my own eyes observed the conditions of transportation and housing in various parts of the country. Much of it is still unsanitary, unsafe and wholly unsatisfactory. Growers, I have heard, claim that it is financially impossible for them to offer any more than they are now providing. What I understand them to be saying in effect is that they intend to provide nothing better lest it cut into their profits.

5. Moral Conditions.

Although the basic morality of the Mexican people is as good or even better than might commonly be found in this country, the circumstances in which they live and work here are obviously conducive to a breakdown of moral practice. I have heard many reports from priests and other church workers in many parts of the country of excessive drinking, high-stake gambling, drug addiction and prostitution. I have for instance heard eye-witness reports of the signs tacked on the barracks doors indicating the schedules and prices of the prostitutes who prey on the weaknesses of men separated from their homes and families.

6. Legalized Peonage.

Many students of U. S. history see in the Mexican Farm Labor Program, a none-too-subtle substitute for slavery. In early California history the struggle was lost by the few who attempted to establish slavery there. Having lost that battle, however, they searched for and found substitutes. At various times in California and elsewhere the equivalent of a slave labor force has been found in various disadvantaged racial groups - Chinese, Japanese, Hindus, Filipinos, Oakies and Arkies, Italian and German prisoners of war and, in recent years, Mexicans and most recently the Japanese again. In every case the living and working conditions have been little if any improvement over slavery itself.

7. Direct Costs to the U.S. Taxpayer.

In the fifteen years that the Mexican Farm Labor Program has been in operation the direct costs of this program to the U. S. taxpayer has amounted to more than one hundred million dollars. This sum is, in effect, a direct subsidy to the relative handful of U. S. farm employers who make use of bracero labor. The U. S. Labor Department estimates that there are approximately forty-five thousand American farm operations in which braceros are employed:

That is, approximately one percent of all U. S. farms; of that one percent, moreover, probably not more than one tenth, or in absolute numbers less than five thousand factories in the field, employed a very high percentage of all the braceros. A little simple arithmetic leads to the conclusion therefore that a tiny group, an almost insignificant number of farm employers have had the equivalent of a slave labor force provided to them at the cost of many tens of millions of dollars to the American taxpayer.

I wonder what would be said if the U. S. Department of Commerce directly spent comparable sums in bringing into this country the products of foreign manufacturers in undercutting competition with the products of U. S. business firms.

At this time when our storage facilities are filled to overflowing with unused wheat, corn, cotton, and other farm products what would be said if the U. S. Department of Agriculture were required at great cost to bring into this country millions of tons of directly competing products? Yet this is what equivalently has been required first of the Department of Agriculture and for the last six years of the Department of Labor. It was always my simple assumption that the function of the U. S. Department of Labor was to concern itself with the problems of U. S. labor and not to provide a great mass of direct competitors. I know the Department has not asked for this responsibility. It probably would be happy to be rid of it, but for at least six years it has been saddled with this anamolous and probably galling burden.

8. Men Away from Home.

Perhaps the most fundamentally adverse aspect of the Mexican Farm Labor Program is the fact that it requires the absence of hundreds of thousands of men from home and families for many weeks or months and in not a few cases even for years. So disruptive of family life is such a situation that the Mexican Hierarchy of the Catholic Church is urging the total elimination of this program.

It is true that in certain critical situations, such as in time of war, it is necessary that large numbers of men be separated for long periods from their families but such a separation is tolerable only in the gravest of crises. Any economic system or method of agricultural organization which is

built on the assumption of the permanent availability of such masses of men is, by any decent standard, morally unacceptable.

PART II

The second general basis for opposition to the particular bills before this committee, and for rejection of any substitute or subterfuge, is what seems to us to be the obvious fact that as long as a large mass of foreign competitive labor is available, the critical problems of U. S. domestic migrant workers will continue to be impossible to solve. If one has concern over the indecencies and injustices perpetrated on citizens of another nation, one must be even more seriously concerned when the same and worse treatment is visited upon our own American citizens. No one has an accurate count but reasonable estimates would place the number of American migratory farm workers somehwere between five hundred thousand to a million.

I have been around Washington long enough to have observed with shock and shame the sorry and sometimes even cynical performance of various branches of our national government when they have been asked to deal effectively with this most serious problem. I have seen what organized pressure groups, representing but a handful of employers, can so often do to reduce the elected representatives of the people or the appointed administrators of the Executive Department to the position of pleaders for, or - at best - unwilling cooperators in, the narrow, selfish, unjust interests of the few.

We hold it as one of our most cherished American principles that all men are created equal. But for the hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens in the migratory labor force this principle is cold comfort indeed. Their equality ends with the cradle, or before they even reach the cradle.

From the time of their birth they will experience equality neither in nourishment nor health nor housing nor education. They will be denied opportunity for decent employment, for wholesome, stable family and community living. They will be social misfits and political outcasts.

This is a matter to weigh heavily on the conscience of every American citizen and more heavily on the consciences of those who are directly involved in it. As a priest I wonder how God will judge this nation which tolerates such patent and widespread injustices.

The problem always has been that any solution would require an effort and sacrifices that hurt. But there are times when sacrifices are necessary - especially when the sacrifice called for is the renunciation by the few of the unfair and unjust advantages they enjoy at the expense of the many. If these words seem unnecessarily harsh and uncompromising they seem nonetheless to be the only possible moral judgment.

I do not want here to seem to be speaking only of the symptomatic evils of the situation. Even if the housing, transportation, wage, income and all the other obvious evils of the living and working conditions were eliminated, there still would remain the basic fact that many hundreds of thousands of people, by the nature of their employment, must live essentially on the move. Can such a way of life be considered satisfactory? I cannot conceive of it as possible. It would take more imagination than I possess to see how families habitually on the move or the men of which are habitually away from home could provide proper conditions for an acceptable way of life.

PART III

On the basis of the foregoing, it seems to us that the conclusion is inescapable that if this is what it takes to put certain products on the tables of American consumers then consumers have no right to have those products. Certainly they would not eat their salad or enjoy their fruits and vegetables with so much relish if it were made clear to them with how much human misery they are stained.

The conclusion seems inescapable that if this is what it takes to make profit possible for the relatively few producers of these products then the producers have no right to such profits extorted from the flesh and the spirit of their fellow men.

If this is what it takes to keep a part of our agriculture going then every principle of decency and of justice demands that we simply do away with it.

The first step towards a solution of the problems of our own American citizens in the migratory labor force and towards the reorganization of that small part of our agricultural economy is to eliminate the source of foreign labor which disrupts and destroys any reasonable labor market for American workers. If the Mexican Farm Labor Program could be terminated, then there might be at least the possibility of beginning to work out a more decent and equitable - and in the long run more profitable - use of both our natural and human resources.

The NCRLC therefore urgently recommends that the Mexican Farm Labor Program, whether under Public Law 78 or under any other legal or extra-legal arrangement, be permanently abolished. We recognize that it may not be possible or even desirable to do so instantly and without warning. We would

urgently recommend, therefore, that if the termination date of Public Law 78 be extended that it be done with the clear and firm understanding that this extension is provided solely for the purpose of allowing reasonable time for fundamental readjustments. We feel there must be an irrevocable commitment that at a definite and not distant date our borders must be closed to temporary importation of foreign farm workers from Mexico or elsewhere.